A Serving Church

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A Serving Church:
Overcoming Polarization Through Christian Wisdom

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Introduction

This paper will take the situation of the Catholic Church in the Netherlands as a starting point in order to present some ideas on how the Church can overcome polarization. Since the sixties of last century, the Catholic Church in the Netherlands has been marked by a fierce polarization. Its causes are partly common to all Western European societies, and partly specific for the situation in the Netherlands. First, the pan-European trends of pluralization and individualization have not only resulted in a growing number of religious and secular worldviews, meaning that all organizations have become minorities, and that the Catholic church is only one of them, but these trends have also profoundly changed the ways in which people consider themselves as member of a (religious) community.[1] The overall result of these processes is that almost everyone, not only those outside, but also inside the Church, has become a seeker: people live a life that is no longer comprehensively bound by an insti-

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[1] For an overview of the effects of these common factors on religion, see Loek Halman, "Patterns of European Religious Life," in S. Hellemans and P. Jonkers (eds.), *A Catholic Minority Church in a World of Seekers.* Washington: Council for Research in Values and Philosophy, 2015, pp. 21-70; Staf Hellemans, "Tracking the New Shape of the Catholic Church in the West," in S. Hellemans and J. Wissink (eds.), *Towards a New Catholic Church in Advanced Modernity: Transformations, Visions, Tensions*. Berlin: Lit Verlag, 2012, pp. 23f. and Idem, "Imagining the Catholic Church in a World of Seekers," in S. Hellemans and P. Jonkers (eds.), *A Catholic Minority Church in a World of Seekers*, pp. 129-160; Joep de Hart and Paul Dekker, "Floating Believers: Dutch Seekers and the Church," in S. Hellemans and P. Jonkers (eds.), *A Catholic Minority Church in a World of Seekers*, pp. 71-96.

tution or by transcendent substantial values, but are guided by the normative examples of expressive individualism and authenticity.[2]

It goes without saying that many people, inside as well as outside the Church, members of the ecclesiastical hierarchy and ordinary faithful, evaluate these ongoing evolutions very differently: some fear that (religious) traditions and institutions are jeopardized by the rise of expressive individualism; others, by contrast, welcome individualization as a means to put an end to every form of (ecclesiastical) organization, which they deem as an oppression of (spiritual) freedom. Anyway, as far as the Church is concerned, the overall result of these heavily diverging evaluations of the role of religion and Church in today's predominantly secular society has been a growing polarization.

But in order to fully understand the current polarized situation of the Church in the Netherlands, several specifically Dutch factors have to be taken into account as well. Because Dutch society had traditionally been tightly organized in different (religious) segments or compartments, the above trends affected it particularly gravely. They caused a sharp decline of formal church membership in a short period of time, thus changing Dutch society from one of the most churched societies in Europe into one of the most secular ones.[3] As regards the Catholic part of the population, this evolution can be explained by the fact that, after the Second World War, many Dutch Catholics felt the dominant role of the Church in their 'compartment' of society as a more and more galling bond, especially because they had just started to make up their social and economic arrears. They were convinced that their emancipation was only completed if they totally identified with mainstream, secular society. Other Catholics, however, wanted to hold on to the compartmen-

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[2] Staf HELLEMANS and Peter JONKERS, "Introduction. The Contingent Meeting of a Catholic Minority Church With Seekers," in S. HELLEMANS and P. JONKERS (eds.), *A Catholic Minority Church in a World of Seekers*, p. 7.

[3] However, the decline of formal Church membership has hardly affected the general religiosity of the Dutch, as the contribution of Joep de HART and Paul DEKKER, "Floating Believers: Dutch Seekers and the Church," pp. 73 ff. shows.

talized society and to the clearly identifiable, hierarchical Church of before the Second World War. In a similar vein, a lot of Dutch Catholics saw the texts produced by the Second Vatican Council not as the final results of a long process of internal consultation about the role of the Church in society, but rather as a starting point for an even more radical opening of the Church to secular society. Hence, they wanted to implement the decisions of the Council as quickly and extremely as possible. Others, however, experienced the disappearance of the pre-Vatican Church as a loss. Especially the renewal of the traditional liturgy with its 'smells and bells' was the cause of fierce polarization among many loyal Catholics.[4]

Now, fifty years later, it is clear that the costs of these polarized options in the Netherlands have been considerable: the conservative option has led to a retrenchment of the Church into a small defensive bulwark against modern society, whereas the liberal option has resulted in a Church that has lost a great deal of its identity, because it proved to be unable to distinguish itself from secular society at large.[5] But, far more importantly, the overall consequence of both options has been that the Church in the Netherlands has lost a great deal of its relevance to society in the eyes of many people.

In this context, it deserves to be noted that the traditional description of the situation in the Church as being polarized between liberals and conservatives may not be an adequate indication anymore of current situation. A bi-polar polarization presupposes the existence of two clearly defined camps of more or less equal strength with

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[4] See Staf Hellemans, "Tracking the New Shape of the Catholic Church in the West," pp. 20-23; Joep de Hart and Paul Dekker, "Floating Believers: Dutch Seekers and the Church;" Peter Jonkers, "From Rational Doctrine to Christian Wisdom," in S. Hellemans and P. Jonkers (eds.), *A Catholic Minority Church in a World of Seekers*, pp. 168 ff.

[5] S. Hellemans, "Imagining the Catholic Church in a World of Seekers," p. 156. Halik draws a similar conclusion when he writes about Ecclesiastical Christianity's unfortunate reactions to the victory of secularism: "either *liberalism:* uncritically allowing its identity to dissolve into the secular culture, or *fundamentalism,* withdrawing into a ghetto of disgruntled and paranoid counter-culture'." Cf. Tomas Halik, "Europe Between Laicity and Christianity," in Tomas Halik and Pavel Hosek (eds.), *A Czech Perspective on Faith in a Secular Age.* Washington: Council for Research in Values and Philosophy, 2015, p. 57.

conflicting or even incompatible views. During, approximately, the last three decades of the twentieth century this was certainly the case in the Dutch church. But because individualization and pluralization have pervaded all Western societies more and more, the clear dichotomy between liberals and conservatives in the Church, just like many other dichotomies in society at large, have somehow evaporated. Pope Francis' informal way of doing, his decision to reorganize the curia, his attempts to 'rebrand' the image and to a certain extent also the doctrine of the Church make it difficult for conservative faithful, and even for some bishops, to hold on to their fundamental attitude of loyalty to the Pope. And although liberals have welcomed the opening of the Church to the modern world, many of them are not at all happy with the direction that today's society is taking in many moral and social issues, and the fact that society has turned its back to the Church altogether. These and many other examples show that polarization has not so much disappeared, but is taking a different shape: the bi-polar polarization in the Church has been replaced by a multi-polar Church, a heterogeneous and instable field. Depending on the specific issue at stake, individual faithful decide which side they take, the one taking a liberal stance, the other a conservative one. This, again, shows to what extent the processes of individualization and pluralization have pervaded Western society, including the Church.

However, all these heterogeneous answers to the question how the Church should react to specific developments in the (post)modern world, reflect the far more important underlying issue that Christians' relation to the world has been and always will be a fundamentally ambivalent one. In my view, this principled question needs to be examined first in order to answer the question how the Church can overcome its polarized ideas on how to relate to today's society. Therefore, I will, in the next section, analyze this ambivalence further, thereby making use of Pope emeritus Benedict's suggestion that only by becoming 'unworldly' will the Church be able to serve the world in a truthful way. Building on this analysis, I will discuss, in the section thereafter, a few ideas on how the Church can develop a

new, authentic relation to contemporary society, in other words, how it can become a serving Church. These ideas derive from the contributions to the second part of the volume on *A Catholic Minority Church in a World of Seekers*.[6] In the final two sections, I will develop my own ideas on this issue further, namely that the Church can serve the world by presenting itself as a tradition of practical wisdom, and the implications of this approach for the question of religious truth.

In the World, but Not *of* the World

In his address in Freiburg of September 2011, Pope emeritus Benedict gave an intriguing analysis of the ambivalent nature of Christianity's relationship with the world, by commenting on the proverb of the Gospel that Christians should be *in,* but not *of* the world.[7] In his view, the Church, "in order to accomplish [its] mission, […] will need again and again to set [itself] apart from [its] surroundings, to become in a certain sense 'unworldly'."[8] He defines a 'worldly church' as a church, which "becomes self-satisfied, settles down in this world, becomes self-sufficient and adapts [it]self to the standards of the world."[9] Hence, he welcomes the secularization process as a necessary step in order to untie the traditional knot between Church and society, thereby referring to well-known examples of secularization, such as the expropriation of Church goods or elimination of its privileges.[10] He qualifies this process not

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[6] S. Hellemans and P. Jonkers (eds.), *A Catholic Minority Church in a World of Seekers*, pp. 163-268.

[7] John, 17:16.

[8] Benedict xvi, *Address of His Holiness Pope Benedict xvi in Freiburg im Breisgau, Sunday, September 25, 2011*. Rome: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 2011.

[9] Benedict xvi, *Address of September 25, 2011.*

[10] Ibid. F.-X. Kaufmann, unfortunately, interprets the address of Pope Emeritus Benedict xvi primarily in this sociological and juridical way, and thereby fails to see its theological intention. See Franz-Xaver Kaufmann, "Entweltlichte Kirche?," in *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, January 7, 2012, p. 11.

as a loss, but rather as a liberation of the Church from all kinds of problematic forms of worldliness.

With his warning of a church that has become too much *of* the world, or his plea for a detachment of the Church from the world as it actually is, Benedict expresses his opposition against the above mentioned liberal option. Given his conservative reputation, this should not be a surprise. But his proposal for the Church's detachment from the (modern) world should not be misunderstood as a plea for a complete withdrawal from it, since this would run counter to the admonition of the gospel that Christians should be *in* the world. So, in spite of his fierce critique of the moral, cultural, and intellectual relativism of (post)modernity and its reductionist positivism, Benedict's main concern is a positive one, namely to explore new ways, in which the Church can be truly *in* the world.

But how does Benedict concretize this exhortation of the Gospel? In his view, if the Church is liberated from its material and political burdens and privileges, it is far better equipped to fulfill its missionary task: it can reach out more effectively and in a truly Christian way to the whole world, and be truly open to it. To phrase it paradoxically, insofar as it resolutely moves away from its worldliness, that is, from its problematic alliance with the world as it actually is, the Church "open[s] up afresh to the cares of the world, to which she herself belongs, and give herself over to them."[11] In sum, characteristic of an unworldly Church is that it is "not bracketing or ignoring anything from the truth of our present situation, but living the faith fully here and now in the utterly sober light of day, appropriating it completely, and stripping away from it anything that only seems to belong to faith, but in truth is mere convention or habit."[12]

However, in spite of all his good intentions, one can ask whether Benedict's fierce opposition to the modern world will not result in a Church that is completely out of touch with it, thus running the risk that, eventually, its voice will not be heard anymore by the world.

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[11] BENEDICT XVI, *Address of September 25, 2011.*

[12] Ibid.

In particular, many people have the impression that the Church often does not open up to their cares, but overpowers their authentic search for meaning and hope with fixed certainties and abstract, doctrinal truths. In sum, many do not experience the Church as helpful in their quest for orientation in today's radically pluralist and individualized world, in which almost all traditional points of reference have dissolved. But if Benedict's only positive alternative for his critical stance towards contemporary society were to harp on the importance of doctrinal truths, such an approach would not only be counterproductive, but also, and more importantly, fail to realize the Church's true vocation, namely that it should open up to the cares of the world, and fulfill Christ's appeal that his disciples should be *in* the world. So, the question remains how the Church can overcome its internal polarization over the question of its relation to the world in such a way that it opens up to the cares of the world, while at the same time remaining to be the salt of the earth, in other words, refraining from becoming *of* the world. The idea of a serving Church points to a possible answer to this question, since it wants to spread a message of hope in response to the cares of the world.

A Church Open to the Cares of the World

In the second part of the volume *A Catholic Minority Church in a World of Seekers,* various authors present their ideas about how the Church can serve today's individualized and pluralized world in a truthful way. In his contribution, Terrence Merrigan links up with Taylor's investigation of the modern ideal of authenticity, resulting in a subjective turn in religion, and examines if and how the work of Newman can be interpreted as an in our context still relevant reaction to this situation.[13] His central idea is that of the exile of the religious subject in a secular age. This exile is a kind of no-man's-land, meaning that the subject is no longer at home in the world

[13] See Terrence MERRIGAN, "The Exile of the Religious Subject: A Newmanian Perspective on Religion in Contemporary Society," in S. HELLEMANS and P. JONKERS (eds.), *A Catholic Minority Church in a World of Seekers*, pp. 193-222.

and no more secure in himself, that he is threatened by the cold, secular world without and unsettled by the fragility of the spiritual world within. The term 'exile' evokes the religious subject's sense of dislocation, of being uprooted, of being somehow in the wrong place. However, it is quite probable that, ultimately, when he wants to leave this exile, this subject gives ear to the siren song of the world, thus reaffirming the status quo rather than being challenged to improve his life or even entertaining the hope that life can be better than it is. From this perspective, the future for the religious self, when left to himself, seems rather bleak.

According to Merrigan, the only possible escape from the overwhelming grip of the world on those who really seek to follow the lead of the voice speaking from within is revealed religion. Revealed religion gives rise to a practice-oriented spirituality, which is no longer restricted to determining 'who one is', but also requires one to engage in a reflection on one's appropriation of experience. This may promote an interest in the stories of others, of fellow practitioners and their narrative traditions. This line of thought resonates Taylor's idea that the subject who strives after authenticity, is in need of inescapable horizons of meaning and strong evaluations, which are embedded in, among others, religious traditions. Hence, the churches, which are the treasurers of revealed religion, can help the religious subject from his exile in the no-man's-land between the secular world outside and the fragile, spiritual world within.

When applied to European Catholics, living amidst the remains of Christendom and regularly seeing portions of its historical patrimony 'returned' to the world, there is a profound sense of estrangement from the prevailing culture, a culture in which even the interest in practice-oriented spirituality is at best a minority concern, and, far more problematic, the person (of whatever faith) who takes religion seriously is regarded with suspicion. This points to a concrete way in which the Church can open up to the cares of the world, namely by coming to the aid of the religious exile. This means that the Church should acknowledge and understand the appeal to inwardness that is characteristic of modernity. To put it more concretely, the Church

should value the religious potential of the inward turn, while at the same time remaining skeptical about the potential of a vague, general spirituality to generate religious depth and promote communitarian religion. Thirdly, the Church should encourage the quest of the committed religious subject for a dynamic orientation towards the 'otherness' represented by revelatory traditions and communitarian forms of religion. But even if this way of opening up to the world is successful, this will not prevent the life of the committed religious subject from experiencing a twofold experience of exile, namely, a nagging sense that our age is out of joint, and a profound awareness that the religious subject himself is somehow party to the experience of dislocation. In this situation, a concrete way, in which the Church can open up to the cares of the world, is by endeavoring to tap into, and engage with, the religious subject's spiritual aspirations and to allow itself to be challenged by them. It is only by doing so that the Church can begin to overcome its own (sometimes self-imposed) exile from the people it is called to serve.

In his contribution, Stephan Van Erp discusses another approach for the Church to serve today's society without accommodating itself to the world and thus losing its identity.[14] He explores public life as a sacramental practice in order to construct a theological framework that could serve as a proposal for reconsidering the relationship between the Church and the secular. The Church considers the concrete sacraments as signs and instruments of God's presence in the world at significant moments in people's lives. However, as Van Erp argues, thereby following Schillebeeckx, the presence of God's salvation through the sacraments is not limited to the Church alone, but encompasses the whole of human history. But in order to avoid the erroneous conclusion that the Church could be found everywhere, one has to recognize at the same time that there are important differences between the Church and public life. Against this background, Van Erp is rather critical with regard to the current

[14] Stephan Van Erp, "Exploring Public Life as a Sacrament: On Divine Promise in a World of Seekers," in S. Hellemans and P. Jonkers (eds.), *A Catholic Minority Church in a World of Seekers*, pp. 223-241.

forms of public theology, precisely because they have failed to maintain a theological position and distinguish themselves from the world. By contrast, the *nouvelle théologie* of the twentieth century is much more promising in this respect, because it offers an ontology that allows for a less disjunctive representation of the relationship between the Church and the secular, without resigning to non-religious or non-theological arguments.

Against this background the question arises whether, in our times, such an ontology offers still a convincing account of reality that could make the Church appealing to the world again. In order to answer this question one has to reflect on how faith can be a responsive act to today's world, a response that is critical of modernity without becoming anti-modern, and operates in an increasingly secular culture without losing its position as a particular tradition of faith. Van Erp proposes that public life could itself be regarded as a sacramental practice of response or witnessing, thus pointing to a concrete way in which the Church can serve the world. In particular, the Church's social teaching must be the proof of the extent to which it understands itself as the eschatological community of salvation in the world.

In order to bridge the gap between the Church and secular society Van Erp assumes that people in and outside the Church have something in common as far as their relationship to their environment and fellow human beings is concerned, namely a similar way of participating in public life. Insofar as this participation can be marked as sacramental, it is possible to understand the becoming of the Church from that sacramental practice. Hence, Van Erp pleas for an engagement of the church in a conversation with contemporary society about their respective ways of participating in public life. To discern the sacramental in public life, it is important to note that sacraments are not considered to be instances of a miraculous divine revelatory act, but effective signs of God's ongoing presence to the world. Sacraments are calling on the community of believers to witness to God's presence and to make visible and become the instrument of the promise of salvation. Secondly, sacraments should

not be viewed as the right of a hierarchical Church to dispense or withdraw them to the faithful, so that the former become an instrument of control, since this would create a sharp distinction between the church and public life. Rather, sacraments can be compared with an oath, which is an assurance backed by religious sanctity, a solemn promise to be sacredly kept. By taking this approach, Christian faith can offer to today's secular culture a view of God's coming presence in public life: an ongoing relationship confirmed and maintained by a politics of trust, a sacramental performance that will not suggest it could make God's presence itself visible.

In his contribution, Rainer Bucher makes a third suggestion how a Catholic minority Church can serve today's world.[15] Contemporary society is characterized by the fact that religion is not only individualized from the side of demand, in the sense that everyone can and actually does build his or her own personal religion, but also from the side of production: many religious characteristics are dispersing, migrating to other cultural fields, such as the media, economic forms, art, and sports. The consequence of these processes is a dramatic internal power shift within the Catholic Church: from the clergy to the individual faithful, and from the ecclesiastical control on the religious offer to a market situation, in which the Church is only one of the competitors, all bidding for the public's favor.

Against this background, Bucher focuses on the need for the Church to move from its traditional position as the 'people's Church' to a 'Church of the people', thereby following the path of Vatican II. This new path is an inclusive one, characterized by openness towards spiritual, intellectual, and political challenges. It implies that the Church moves from a position of unreachable and untouchable sovereignty to a position in which it only focuses on salvation, a position which accepts no limitations to solidarity. This means that the Church needs to take a new social shape, and becomes a true

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[15] Rainer BUCHER, "The Roman Catholic Church in Late Modernity: Analyses and Perspectives from a Western Point of View," in S. HELLEMANS and P. JONKERS (eds.), *A Catholic Minority Church in a World of Seekers*, pp. 243-268.

'Church of the people', whose central characteristic is the kenosis. The term kenosis means here that the Church is not an end in itself, but the servant of a message, that it has given up its exclusivism and redefines itself as a Church of the people, expressing its solidarity with humankind without reservation, and, finally, that it has become aware that Christian faith has to verify itself pragmatically in the here and now, and can only achieve presence and prove its truthfulness through this verification. In other words, the Church's pastoral actions have to accept the risk of exposure in all kinds of concrete situations.

Hence, Christian practice no longer derives its identity from an overall and encompassing Christian historical narrative, but solely from Jesus as role model, whose actions were, indeed, situational responses to what seemed necessary from the perspective of the other. This principled stance to exclude nobody, to become, paradoxically, a minority church for all, is not only really new for the Church, but it is also risky because it is not realized in the institution, but only in the singular event of the graceful encounter with God. This means that the Catholic Church has to give up what constituted its structure in modernity, namely manageability, continuity and the claim to exclusivity. With his focus on the singular event Bucher intends to show that the Christian message cannot be encapsulated in a static and 'eternal' order, but rather represents a dynamic that is much more in the present. God's Kingdom is the unexpected event of a new beginning without any certainty of its outcome. From this perspective, pastoral care is concerned with God's presence among people in the risky processes of human actions, done in his name. Hence, flexible arrangements get a pivotal role in the Church, to the detriment of maintaining the Church as an established organization.

A Church That Serves the World Through Wisdom

In the final two sections of this paper, I want to develop a bit further my own answer to the question how the Church can serve today's society, based on my contribution to the volume *A Catholic*

Minority Church in a World of Seekers. In today's world, in which everyone, in a certain sense, has become a seeker,[16] the Church can find a new appeal by approaching Christian faith not so much as a doctrine, but rather as a source of true wisdom.[17] To put it more concretely, the invaluable service that Christian wisdom can render to today's people is to offer them a truthful life orientation in a world that has lost most of its traditional orientation marks, because it is so profoundly marked by individualization and radical pluralism. As I will develop in the final section, this approach of Christian faith as a truthful orientation in life also sheds a new light on the hotly debated issue of religious truth.

In the introduction of his book on Christian wisdom, David Ford notes that wisdom may be making a comeback, after being associated for a long time with old people, tradition, and conservative caution in a culture of youth, modernization, innovation, and risky exploration. The revival of wisdom is especially evident in areas where knowledge and (technical) know-how come up against questions of ethics, values, beauty, the shaping and flourishing of the whole person, the common good, and long-term perspectives.[18] As is common knowledge, the getting of wisdom takes time and is bound up necessarily with bodies of tradition, scriptural and otherwise, which are preserved, adapted and passed on in particular human communities, in this case a Christian community of faith.[19] The

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[16] S. Hellemans and P. Jonkers, "Introduction: The Contingent Meeting of a Catholic Minority Church With Seekers," pp. 4-7.

[17] Peter Jonkers, "From Rational Doctrine to Christian Wisdom," pp. 163-191. Interestingly, in a recent document the International Theological Commission holds a similar plea for a revaluation of the sapiential dimension of theology, thereby criticizing the unilateral focus on apologetics and other doctrinal issues, which has dominated theology since the Enlightenment. See: International Theological Commission, *Theology Today: Perspectives, Principles, and Criteria* (Rome: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 2012), 70, 86 ff. Cf. http://goo.gl/OoOHcL.

[18] David Ford, *Christian Wisdom: Desiring God and Learning in Love*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007, p. 1.

[19] Stephen C. Barton, in "Introduction," Stephen C. Barton (ed.), *Where Shall Wisdom Be Found? Wisdom in the Bible, the Church, and the Contemporary World*. Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1999, p. xvii.

examples of wisdom abound in Christian faith, from the Books of Wisdom and the sayings of Jesus to the life stories of people who follow Jesus' example.[20]

In what follows, I will first develop in more detail the idea practical wisdom in general, and then examine to what extent Christian faith can indeed be interpreted as an instantiation of this kind of wisdom, or as an example of a life orientating kind of knowledge.[21] In our times, this kind of knowledge is needed more than ever, because people have come to realize that the enormous growth of scientific knowledge and technical knowhow has been unable to solve all kinds of existential conflicts. Because these conflicts are at the heart of human existence, they are inevitable, consisting of the confrontation between the one-sidedness of moral principles and another one-sidedness, namely that of the contextual and complex nature of human lives.[22] These conflicts give human existence a tragic character. Against this background, the task of practical wisdom is precisely to overcome human tragedy by making the transition from insight in the general principles and the true nature of the good life with and for others to the concrete situations of individual and collective human lives. This means that someone who has a vast knowledge about moral principles, but is unable to relate these appropriately to the complexities of concrete human lives, would not be termed wise, but makes himself guilty of a hubris of practical reason. Similarly, someone who is sensitive to the complexities of people's concrete situations without taking into account the importance of moral principles as objective standards of the good life, yields to the illusions of the heart, and would not be considered wise either.[23]

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[20] For an overview, see Stephen C. BARTON (ed.), *Where Shall Wisdom Be Found?*, Part I: Wisdom in Israel and the Church, pp. 3-181.

[21] This means that I leave aside the kind of wisdom that Aristotle and Thomas Aquinas define as a theoretical knowledge of the first principles.

[22] Paul RICŒUR, *Oneself as Another*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1992, pp. 240-296, here p. 274.

[23] Ibid., p. 241. In this context, it deserves to be noted that several authors deplore the fact that, since modernity, the tension between theoretical, detached knowledge and

Hence, the essence of practical wisdom is to respond to the above existential conflicts by giving a 'moral judgment in situation'. Such a judgment holds at bay the ruinous alternatives of focusing only on the universality of moral principles, leading to the illusion of the univocity of these principles, as well as on the historical contexts of human lives, which leads to the arbitrariness of sentimentalism.[24] Only through a moral judgment in situation can practical wisdom reach its final goal, namely to assist people in their search for a truthful orientation of their lives. However, this does not mean that practical wisdom would be able to put a final end to these existential conflicts, because they result from the conflicting nature of human existence itself.[25]

The capacity to deliberate is essential for practical wisdom, precisely because the latter aims at a moral judgement *in situation*. To phrase it in Aristotelian terms, the objects of practical wisdom are – unlike those of theoretical wisdom – the things that are not of necessity and, hence, are capable of being otherwise. A judgment in situation starts from the general principles of the good life and connects them with the particularity and plurality of human life. Just throwing universal principles and propositions concerning the good life at people's heads is anything but wise, because such a way of doing yields to the illusion that these principles can univocally be applied to the contextual situations of human lives. There-

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life-oriented, engaged love of wisdom has widened to a complete rift, which has obviously gone at the cost of the more holistic idea of knowledge. See: Robert NOZICK, "What is Wisdom and Why do Philosophers Love it so?," IDEM, *The Examined Life: Philosophical Meditations*. New York: Touchstone Press, 1989, p. 273. D. FORD, *Christian Wisdom*, pp. 269-271; Brenda ALMOND, "Seeking Wisdom: Moral Wisdom or Ethical Expertise," in Stephen C. BARTON (ed.), *Where Shall Wisdom Be Found?*, pp. 202-205; Daniel KAUFMAN, "Knowledge, Wisdom, and the Philosopher," *Philosophy* 81, 1 (2006), pp. 129-151.

[24] P. RICŒUR, *Oneself as Another*, p. 249.

[25] Ibid. In this study,Paul Ricœur gives several examples of such conflicts between general principles and contextual situations of human lives, which all come down to the problem of how to apply a general rule in a plurality of concrete, existential contexts. The essential task of practical wisdom, in this respect, is to mediate this antinomy by a situational judgment. See Ibid., pp. 249 ff.

fore, a refined deliberation is needed, aimed at a careful assessment of these situations in the light of general moral principles.[26] This explains Nozick's remark that the notion of wisdom always has to take into account the constraints of feasibility, that is, the negative aspects of the best alternative, the value of the next best alternative, and the limits on possibility themselves, which exclude certain alternatives as feasible objects of choice. Furthermore, a wise judgement has to incorporate and balance each of the partial evaluative factors thought relevant. As to the human person, these factors include specific characteristics, current and future opportunities, the kind of life led so far, the situation of others, etc.[27] But it is equally essential not to reduce wisdom to a kind of practical knowhow or to drawing up an inventory of the contingencies and pluralities of human life, since practical wisdom also involves a fundamental reflection on the true nature of the good.[28] All this means that the moral judgement in situation of practical wisdom remains a fragile one, always open to reconsideration, and that practical wisdom can never propose, let alone impose one single response to people's quest for a truthful life orientation. Moreover, because such a judgment in situation has to be made in a context of plurality, the conviction that seals this judgment benefits from the plural character of the underlying debate; a wise person is not necessarily one individual alone.[29]

In my view, the main reason that many traditional as well as contemporary views on practical wisdom are so problematic is that they actually negate the transitional character of wisdom's moral judgments in situation. Most traditional forms of wisdom are rather theoretical, focused on the universal principles of the good life, thereby raising themselves above human passions and the com-

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[26] Wolfgang WELSCH, "Weisheit in einer Welt der Pluralität," in Willi OELMÜLLER (Hrsg.), *Philosophie und Weisheit*. Paderborn, München, Wien, Zürich: Ferdinand Schöningh, 1989, pp. 241ff.

[27] R. NOZICK, "What is Wisdom and Why do Philosophers Love it so?," pp. 270 ff.; 277 ff.

[28] Sharon RYAN, "Wisdom, Knowledge and Rationality," *Acta Analytica* (2012) 27, pp. 99-112, here p. 103.

[29] P. RICŒUR, *Oneself as Another*, p. 273.

plexities of existence. Wisdom thus seems to be something which is imposed on the world from above.[30] But in this way, these traditions give the impression that wisdom is a simple univocal affair, so that it risks to become severed from the concrete lives of people.[31] Contemporary manifestations of wisdom, by contrast, focus on the spatio-temporal settings of human lives, thereby failing to critically examine the hidden assumptions of these settings, in particular the need to relate them to universal moral principles. Consequently, such a kind of presumed wisdom risks to be nothing more than an ideological justification of the existing order.[32] It is clear that neither of these two views on practical wisdom is able to truly orient human lives; the popularity of these approaches, then and now, probably stems from the fact that they give us the illusion of being able to find a definitive solution, albeit in opposite ways, to the existential conflicts that haunt us, and thus create the erroneous impression that either one of these approaches can make human life easy. But by doing so they negate the very nature of practical wisdom, which consists in the fragile nature of every judgment in situation.

When applying these general theses about the nature of practical wisdom in general to Christian wisdom, one can say that it also typically offers a judgement in situation, thus avoiding the above problems of traditional and contemporary forms of wisdom. In essence, being a Christian comes down to the *imitatio Christi,* following the teachings of Jesus. Accepting such a perspective on human life is a way of doing justice to the doctrinal, universalist character of Christian faith. Keeping in mind pope emeritus Benedict's admonitions, if Christians would identify completely with the world as it is, or, to phrase it differently, if Jesus's teachings would be interpreted in such a way that they accommodate to the contingent contexts of human lives, faith does not hold a mirror up to our face anymore, and loses its capacity to orient our lives. If Jesus is only a good

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[30] Robert Song, "Wisdom as the End of Morality," in Stephen C. Barton (ed.), *Where Shall Wisdom Be Found?*, pp. 299-302.

[31] W. Welsch, "Weisheit in einer Welt der Pluralität," p. 227.

[32] B. Almond, "Seeking Wisdom: Moral Wisdom or Ethical Expertise," p. 199.

friend, who comforts us in times of need,[33] and no longer the risen Christ, who returns to earth at the end of times to judge our ways of life, then faith is no expression of practical wisdom anymore, since wisdom is a *judgment* in situation. Eventually, Christian faith would then become *of* the world, instead of *in* the world. But in order to be true wisdom, it is equally important that Christian faith makes the transition from its universalist principles to the concrete situations of human lives. As a judgement in *situation*, Christian wisdom consists in numerous concrete ideas and practices to follow a path of life, aimed at letting one's everyday existence be oriented by a transcendent promise of eternal bliss. But in order to be truly situational and, hence, a true expression of practical wisdom, faith also has to take into account the contingent contexts of human lives and the inevitability of existential conflicts. This implies that following the teachings of Jesus always has to make the transition from these teaching to the specific contexts of human lives.

In my view, an aspect of faith that comes closest to Christian wisdom is the Church's social teaching. It explicitly makes the transition from the universal principles of justice from a Christian perspective to the particular contexts of individuals and societies. In particular, it confers to prudential individuals and groups in society the responsibility to fulfil the task of making situational judgements, which mediate between universal principles and particular contexts.

According to the encyclical *Deus caritas est* "the Church's social doctrine has become a set of fundamental guidelines offering approaches that are valid even beyond the confines of the Church: in the face of ongoing development these guidelines need to be addressed in the context of dialogue with all those seriously concerned for humanity and for the world in which we live."[34] This quotation shows, first, the ambition of the Church to help orienting the contingent sphere of contemporary societies on the basis of the universalist principles of solidarity, subsidiarity, and human dignity,

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[33] See Gianni VATTIMO, *Belief*. Cambridge: Polity Press, 1999, p. 26.

[34] BENEDICT XVI, *Deus Caritas est*, 27.

being concretizations of the common good. But, second, the church also recognizes 'the autonomy of the temporal sphere', because it refrains from imposing these principles directly on modern, and by definition pluralist societies. Phrased positively, it means that the Church admits that these principles have to be brought into a dialogue with society at large: "The Church wishes to help form consciences in political life and to stimulate greater insight into the authentic requirements of justice as well as greater readiness to act accordingly, even when this might involve conflict with situations of personal interest."[35] Moreover, the encyclical explicitly recognizes that it is the state's responsibility to answer "the question of how justice can be achieved here and now,"[36] in other words, to determine how these guidelines can be implemented in the contexts of specific societies. The encyclical thereby takes for granted that the outcome of this mediation will differ from society to society.

Interestingly, when it comes to interpreting the contingent sphere of daily politics in the light of its social teaching, the Church's concrete approach is itself an example of practical wisdom. In order to help achieving justice here and now, the Church does not opt for a top down model, since this would imply becoming disconnected from the diverging societal contexts, in which people are living. Rather, according to its social teaching, the Church has to rely on the prudence of (Christian) politicians and members of civil society at large; they are supposed to have the practical wisdom to make the transition from a profound insight in the fundamental principles of social teaching to the contingent opportunities and constraints of civil societies.

A concrete example of practical wisdom in the social sphere is the idea of participation. According to the *Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church* this idea is the typical implication of the principle of subsidiarity, being one of the fundamental principles of the social teaching of the Church. This principle stipulates that "all

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[35] Benedict xvi, *Deus Caritas est*, 28.

[36] Ibid.

societies of a superior order must adopt attitudes of help ("subsidium") – therefore of support, promotion, development – with respect to lower-order societies,"[37] so that intermediate social entities can properly perform the functions that fall to them, without being absorbed and substituted by entities of a higher level, e.g. the State. The importance of this principle is that people are protected from abuse of power by a higher-level authority. In order to put this principle into practice, "appropriate methods for making citizens more responsible in actively "being a part" of the political and social reality of their country are needed."[38] Hence, the characteristic implication of subsidiarity is participation.

The *Compendium* defines this notion as "a series of activities by means of which the citizen, either as an individual or in association with others, whether directly or through representation, contributes to the cultural, economic, political and social life of the civil community to which he belongs. Participation is a duty to be fulfilled consciously by all, with responsibility and with a view to the common good."[39] Herewith, the *Compendium* shows the practical wisdom character of the Church's social teaching. It recognizes that answering the question how the universal principle of subsidiarity is brought about, in other words, how a participative democracy is organized, depends on the social and historical contexts of the society in which this principle is implemented. But, at the same time, the *Compendium* also stresses the universal importance of the participation: "every democracy should be participative."[40] Because participation is one of the standards of a humane society, initiatives that could jeopardize it "are a source of concern and deserve careful consideration."[41] Time and again, the *Compendium* warns of the dangers of inadequate or incorrect practices of participation. It also

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[37] JOHN PAUL II, *Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church*. Rome: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 2005, p. 186.

[38] Ibid., p. 187.

[39] Ibid., p. 189.

[40] Ibid., p. 190.

[41] Ibid., p. 191.

expresses its concern about attitudes "that cause widespread disaffection with everything connected with the sphere of social and political life."[42] So, the example of participation shows that the Church's Social Teaching is indeed an expression of practical wisdom: this Teaching makes a careful transition from a universal principle to the contextual situation of a concrete society, resulting in a judgment of situation about the (in)adequate ways this principle is implemented.

Wisdom and Religious Truth

In my view, approaching Christian faith as an expression of practical wisdom can shed a new light on the hotly debated issue of religious truth. Due to the vivid experience of the devastating effects of an exclusivist idea of religious truth on the core societal values of religious freedom and tolerance, many people, including many prominent contemporary philosophers, have come to the conclusion that we would be far better off if we drop the idea of religious truth altogether. It should be replaced by the notion of consensus (Rawls and Habermas), or be considered as the effect of a social construction of reality, implying that the plausibility of a religious truth claim does not reach beyond a local community of likeminded people (Rorty). But to my mind, the notion of religious truth cannot be discarded so easily, especially in the case of religions of conversion, e.g. Christian and Islamic faith. When the faithful confess the truth of their religion, they do not simply express their personal attachment to a number of contingent religious opinions and practices, but bear witness to their faith as source of true practical wisdom, because it enables them to find their true destiny in life. The crucial question in this respect is: what entitles religious people to speak of *true* practical wisdom, of their *true* destiny, and what kind of truth are they referring to when they make such claims? Obviously, the truth of practical wisdom is not primarily a theoretical, doctrinal one, because doctrine comes only after the truth that is experienced

[42] Ibid.

and lived by the people who adhere to a specific religion. Hence, the claim to religious truth refers primarily to the experienced truth of a judgement in situation, and is thus linked to the experienced truth of a life-orientation. I have proposed the expression 'existential truth' in order to cover the kind of truth which is expressed by (religious) wisdom.[43]

In contexts of both religious and secular wisdom we use words like 'true' and 'universal' in order to express something essential for human existence, something that is not just true for the individual who expresses it or for a small group of like-minded people. In order to make this concrete, we communicate our commitment to a tradition of (religious) wisdom with others in the public domain, asking them to recognize these expressions of wisdom as expressions of something essential, in other words, to recognize their existential truth. This striving for recognition does not mean that others have to accept our commitment to a specific tradition of wisdom as a source for orientation of their own lives too. This would be a denial of the inevitable dissemination of human existence, and consequently of the real divergence of our substantial commitments. Moreover, expecting, let alone demanding that others accept our tradition of wisdom as the only true one would come down to imposing an exclusivist truth claim, which runs counter to the very essence of modern, democratic societies.

Nevertheless, the fact that people strive for the recognition of their (religious and secular) traditions of practical wisdom shows that there is something essential at stake: others ask us to recognize that,

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[43] I developed the notion of 'existential truth' in various contributions. See: Peter JONKERS, "Contingent Religions, Contingent Truths?," in D. M. GRUBE and P. JONKERS (ed.), *Religions Challenged by Contingency: Theological and Philosophical Perspectives to the Problem of Contingency*. Leiden: Brill, 2008, pp. 161-181; Peter JONKERS, "Religious Truth in a Globalising World," in Ph. QUADRIO and C. BESSELING (eds.), *Religion and Politics in the New Century: Contemporary Philosophical Perspectives*. Sydney: Sydney University Press, 2009, pp. 176-206; Peter JONKERS, "Redefining Religious Truth as a Challenge for Philosophy of Religion," in *European Journal for Philosophy of Religion*, 4 (2012), pp. 139-159.

through their substantial commitment to a tradition of wisdom, they aim to express essential meanings, which they claim to be equally essential as the meanings that we express through our substantial commitments, and this although we may not share their commitments and they may even fill us with repulsion. Hence, the striving for recognition can only take place against the background of conflicting substantial meanings, because only then can all partners become aware of the fact that there is something essential at stake. Therefore, we feel deeply frustrated when others don't want to take these meanings seriously, and reduce them to contingent, private opinions whose acceptance does not rest upon their substance, but merely upon sentimental things, such as not wanting to hurt our feelings, provided that these opinions and, above all, the practices connected to them do not cause too much of a fuss in the public sphere.

What matters to me here is not so much the concrete results of mutual recognition and its social and political implications, but the fact that, while striving for recognition, we reach out towards something essential, towards an existential truth which is beyond our subjective, contingent self. In the end, we don't want to be left alone with our contingent convictions and practices, nor are we prepared to leave others alone with theirs. We humans are too finite to be left alone with our own finitude, too dependent on the recognition of our substantial meanings by others to seriously consider ourselves as the only creators of truth and meaning in a meaningless world.[44]

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[44] It deserves to be noted that the idea of existential truth has much in common with Charles Taylor's idea of the inescapable moral sources of the Self, whose atrophy he considers as one of the main causes of the 'malaise of modernity'. See: Charles Taylor, *Sources of the Self: The Making of the Modern Identity*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989, pp. 91-107. He distinguishes these sources from life-goods as such, which refer to anything valuable, worthy of admiration, to that which makes life worthy or valuable. The term 'moral sources', however, refers to a being or reality that constitutes both the goodness of our actions and aspirations, and our own goodness. Hence, moral sources are not just ideas regarding the good, but also require our commitment to them; in other words, love of the good is what empowers us to be good and to constitute ourselves through these sources. See: Roshnee Ossewaarde-Lowtoo, *Recovering the Human Paradox: The Christian Humanism of Charles Taylor, Paul Valadier, and Joseph Ratzinger*. Bergambacht: 2VM, 2015, p. 39.

In sum, linking the notion of practical wisdom to that of existential truth enables us to redefine the idea of religious truth in a non-exclusivist way. These notions are attempts to discover, *in* the contingency which inevitably characterizes our ways of life, the essence of a truthful way of life.[45] In particular, they can help us to overcome the typically (post)modern bifurcations between subjectivity and objectivity, particularity and universality, immanence and transcendence, in other words, between a truth that can be demonstrated scientifically, as the expression of an objective state of affairs, and private, contingent opinions. In sum, religious wisdom expresses existential truth, in the sense that is shows a personal or collective commitment to something essentially worthwhile, which reveals itself primarily in and through a plurality of contextual life-situations.

[45] Ricœur makes a similar point with regard to the universality of the idea of human rights and the plurality of its implementations. See P. RICŒUR, *Oneself as Another*, p. 289.